MARVEL

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STAR WARS

HIDDEN EMPIRE

SOULE

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STAR WARS

HIDDEN EMPIRE

PART 2

"THE DAWN FLEET"

Dreaming of a freer galaxy, **LADY QI'RA** and her organization, **CRIMSON DAWN**, have waged a secret war against the Empire. Qi'ra activated operatives across the galaxy to cause havoc and distract the Emperor while she sought a power capable of deposing the Sith Lord.

Qi'ra learned the means of prevailing against the Sith from her predecessor, Maul. His teachings led her to the **FERMATA CAGE**, an artifact that sealed away an ancient Sith Lord suspended in time. Qi'ra tasked the Archivist with freeing this Sith to serve as a weapon against the Emperor.

Qi'ra's smoke screen bought her time, but she has earned the Emperor's undivided attention--and wrath. Seeking to eradicate Crimson Dawn, the Emperor ordered the destruction of their flagship, the *Vermillion*.

Qi'ra escaped aboard Chanath Cha's ship yet urgently needs the Archivist to complete her work. The disturbance in the Force caused by the artifact serves as a beacon to Qi'ra's enemies, and Crimson Dawn cannot hide forever....

Written by
CHARLES SOULE

Art by
STEVEN CUMMINGS

Inked by
VICTOR OLAZABA

Colored by
GURU-eFX

Lettered by
VC's TRAVIS LANHAM

Cover Art by
PAULO SIQUEIRA & **RACHELLE ROSENBERG**

Variant Cover Art by
STEVEN CUMMINGS & **GURU-eFX** (CONNECTING);
DAVID LOPEZ (TRAVEL); **DECLAN SHALVEY** (BATTLE)

Logo & Book Design by
ADAM DEL RE

Assistant Editor
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Lucasfilm Story Group
MATT MARTIN, PABLO HIDALGO & **EMILY SHKOUKANI**

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EMPIRES NEED ENEMIES.

THEY NEED A JUSTIFICATION FOR ALL THOSE WEAPONS...FOR ALL THOSE SOLDIERS.

A REASON FOR THEIR SUBJECTS TO BE AFRAID, SO THE PEOPLE WILL TOLERATE A LEVEL OF CONTROL THEY WOULD NEVER OTHERWISE ALLOW.

PALPATINE WAS VERY GOOD AT FINDING ENEMIES.

FIRST, THE SEPARATISTS DURING THE CLONE WARS, THEN THE JEDI DURING THE PURGE.

I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF HE CREATED THE REBEL ALLIANCE HIMSELF, JUST TO KEEP THE GAME GOING.

WELL, SHE'S GOT THAT MUCH WRONG, AT LEAST.

I SUPPOSE. BUT EVEN IF HE DIDN'T START THE REBELLION, HE ABSOLUTELY USED IT.

BUT SOMETIMES, ENEMIES ARE JUST ENEMIES. PALPATINE HAD PLENTY OF THOSE TOO.

LADY QI'RA AND HER CRIMSON DAWN SYNDICATE, FOR INSTANCE.

PALPATINE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT. NOT AT FIRST.

ONE OF QI'RA'S PRIMARY DEFENSES WAS THAT CRIMSON DAWN WAS TOO SMALL TO BE NOTICED.

A BUG CRAWLING ON THE GROUND, BENEATH THE NOTICE OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL EMPIRE.

BUT EVENTUALLY, QI'RA'S ACTIONS IN HER SECRET WAR AGAINST THE SITH DREW PALPATINE'S GAZE DIRECTLY TO HER.

AND THEN...

"...DOWN CAME THE BOOT."

IT WASN'T ENOUGH THAT THE EMPIRE DESTROYED MY FLAGSHIP. THE TIE FIGHTERS ARE TARGETING THE *VERMILLION'S* ***ESCAPE PODS.***

MURDERING MY PEOPLE.

THOSE...

...***BASTARDS.***

THEY DON'T KNOW YOU WEREN'T ABOARD, QI'RA. THEY'RE TARGETING THE ESCAPE PODS TO MAKE SURE THEY GET YOU TOO.

WE'RE FREE AND CLEAR--AND ALMOST AT THE COORDINATES YOU GAVE ME.

BUT I'M RISKING ***MY*** SHIP AND ***MY*** CREW TO GET YOU WHEREVER WE'RE GOING. I NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHERE WE'RE HEADED AND WHY.

OF COURSE, ***CHANATH CHA.*** I APPRECIATE EVERYTHING YOU AND ***THE ORPHANS*** ARE DOING FOR ME--AND NOTHING WILL HAPPEN TO THE ***SIROTO.***

I PROMISE.

AS FAR AS WHAT WE'RE DOING HERE...I HAVE SAFE HOUSES ALL OVER THE GALAXY. I ALWAYS KNEW I MIGHT HAVE TO GO TO GROUND AS THIS DREW TO ITS CONCLUSION.

YOU CAN'T GO TO WAR AGAINST THE SITH AND NOT EXPECT TO ATTRACT SOME HEAT.

SAFE HOUSE? *WHAT* SAFE HOUSE?

THERE'S NOTHING HERE. SENSORS AREN'T PICKING UP A THING.

THAT'S GOOD. MEANS THE JAMMERS ARE WORKING.

JUST KEEP FLYING, ***SEAR***. RIGHT ALONG THE PATH I GAVE YOU.

TRUST ME.

QUESTION: TRUST IS ***EARNED***, NOT ***REQUESTED***, *CORRECT?*

THAT'S TRUE, ***LADYBRIGHT***.

BUT IF NOTHING ELSE, I HOPE I'VE ***EARNED*** THE TRUST THAT I ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN.

AND AS YOU'RE ABOUT TO SEE...

Dawnfall Base.

...I PLANNED FOR THIS TOO.

YOU'VE GOT A WHOLE *FLEET?* THEY LOOK... *GOOD.*

OF COURSE THEY DO, *IMARA.* STYLE IS IMPORTANT.

HOW DID YOU *AFFORD* ALL THIS?

CRIME PAYS, CHANATH CHA.

BUT MOST BOSSES PUT THEIR MONEY INTO FLASH AND *WASTE.* I DIDN'T. EVERY CREDIT I SPENT WAS WITH A PURPOSE.

THIS PURPOSE. THE *BIG* PURPOSE.

"I KNEW A TIME WOULD COME WHEN I'D NEED TO DEPLOY CRIMSON DAWN IN A NEW WAY. A WAY THAT WOULD TAKE PALPATINE BY SURPRISE.

"HE THINKS HE HAS US. HE THINKS WE CAN'T FIGHT BACK.

"WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT, HE'LL LEARN HOW WRONG HE IS."

NOW HAVE I EARNED YOUR TRUST?

I DO NOT TRUST. I EVALUATE PROBABILITIES. BUT I CAN SAY THAT THE ODDS IN YOUR FAVOR HAVE INDEED IMPROVED.

BUT NOT *THAT* MUCH. THIS IS AMAZING, LADY QI'RA--BUT IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO DESTROY THE *EMPIRE.*

I'M NOT TRYING TO DESTROY THE EMPIRE. I'M TRYING TO *END* THE SITH. AND THIS WOULDN'T BE ENOUGH FOR EVEN THAT, NOT ON ITS OWN.

FORTUNATELY...

"...THE DAWN FLEET IS NOT MY ONLY WEAPON."

I HAVE TO ASK...DO WE *REALLY* WANT TO RISK TURNING THIS THING ON AGAIN?

IT'S NOT A *RISK*, KHO...IT'S AN *ADVENTURE.*

UH-HUH.

HOLD ON. I'M GETTING A CALL. AND SINCE ONLY *ONE PERSON* IN THE GALAXY KNOWS WHERE WE ARE...

HELLO, QI'RA.

ARCHIVIST. I NEED A STATUS REPORT.

THINGS ARE GOING... FAIRLY WELL. FOR ONE THING, IT WAS PRETTY LIKELY THAT WE'D *DIE* WHEN WE FIRST TRIED TO ACTIVATE THE *FERMATA CAGE*--BUT WE DIDN'T!

SINCE WE *SURVIVED*, WE CAN APPLY WHAT WE'VE LEARNED TO SUBSEQUENT ATTEMPTS TO TURN THE THING ON.

KHO PHON FARRUS HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY HELPFUL--THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF *ASCENDANT TECHNOLOGY* HAS HELPED MAKE UP FOR LOSING *THE KNIGHTS OF REN.*

YOU CAN USE THE FERMATA CAGE WITHOUT FORCE USERS, THEN?

ABSOLUTELY.

BUT REN DID TELL US SOMETHING *IMPORTANT* BEFORE HE LEFT...

ATTEMPTING TO OPEN THE FERMATA CAGE CREATED A SORT OF... *TURBULENCE* IN THE FORCE. WE'VE BEEN ANALYZING IT AS BEST AS WE CAN.

REN SAID FORCE USERS COULD *SENSE* IT. SO, WE NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT THE NEXT ATTEMPT. FOR ALL WE KNOW, PALPATINE MIGHT ALREADY KNOW WE'RE UP TO SOMETHING.

OH, HE *DEFINITELY* KNOWS.

OH? HOW CAN YOU BE SO SURE?

BECAUSE I TOLD HIM.

I ALSO TOLD HIM WE'RE WORKING TO FREE AN ANCIENT SITH THAT WAS TRAPPED OUTSIDE TIME IN THE FERMATA CAGE.

WHY DID YOU DO THAT, QI'RA?

I NEED PALPATINE *OFF-BALANCE. AFRAID,* IF HE'S EVEN CAPABLE OF FEAR.

THERE'RE ONLY TWO THINGS THAT MIGHT WORRY HIM--JEDI OR ANOTHER SITH.

AND I DON'T HAVE ANY JEDI.

GET IT DONE, ARCHIVIST. I BELIEVE IN YOU. QI'RA OUT.

UGH. WE CAN'T DEFEAT PALPATINE UNLESS WE TURN ON THE FERMATA CAGE... BUT IF WE DO THAT, HE'LL COME STRAIGHT FOR US.
HE *HAS* TO, AFTER WHAT QI'RA TOLD HIM.
WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO, KHO?
I'LL TELL YOU WHAT *I'M* GOING TO DO, AT LEAST.
I'M GOING TO *LEAVE.*
WHAT?
THIS WAS INTERESTING, ARCHIVIST, BUT I DECIDED TO HELP YOU BECAUSE I WANTED TO LEARN A FEW THINGS I DIDN'T KNOW. I'VE DONE THAT.
I'M GOING TO GO HANG OUT WITH *SANA STARROS* AGAIN. SHE'S DANGEROUS TOO, BUT AT LEAST *SHE'S* FUN.
NO, WAIT! I CAN'T DO THIS BY MYSELF!
MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T DO IT AT ALL. SEE YOU AROUND, MAYBE.
HERE! IF YOU STAY, YOU CAN HAVE THIS!
PFF. WHY WOULD I WANT SOME *RAG?*
IT'S *NOT* A RAG! IT'S THE RAIMENTS OF A NOTABLE *DARK SIDE* PRACTITIONER FROM AGES AGO--THE TERRIFYING *LADY SHAA!*
QI'RA HAD IT WITH ALL HER ARTIFACTS. IF YOU STAY TO HELP... IT'S *YOURS.*
WELL, BLAST IT. YOU *DO* KNOW HOW TO RING MY BELL, DON'T YOU?
GUESS IT'S TIME FOR ME TO MAKE AN INCREDIBLY FOOLISH DECISION. *AGAIN.*

The *Executor.*
Flagship of Sith
Lord Darth Vader.

"I FOUND NOTHING BUT WRECKAGE AT THE LOCATION IN QUESTION, MY MASTER."

BUT IT WAS THE SOURCE OF THE DISTURBANCE IN THE DARK SIDE. I AM ***CERTAIN*** OF IT.

DO YOU BELIEVE QI'RA'S PEOPLE SUCCEEDED IN FREEING A SITH FROM THE FERMATA CAGE, MY APPRENTICE?

NO. A SITH WOULD HAVE KILLED THEM BEFORE LEAVING. I SAW NO BODIES.

HMPH. SO THE THREAT REMAINS, POSSIBLY.

UNLESS THE FOOLISH WOMAN LIED TO ME BEFORE HER DEATH.

EITHER WAY, LORD VADER, YOU MUST FIND QI'RA'S AGENTS, DESTROY THEM AND BRING ME THE FERMATA CAGE.

IT WILL BE DONE, MY MASTER. BUT DO YOU THINK... IT IS POSSIBLE? ANOTHER SITH?

Coruscant.

I... DO.

THE FERMATA CAGE WAS A *TRAP* CREATED BY AN ANCIENT SITH LORD...YOU KNOW HIS NAME, IN FACT. HE DESIGNED YOUR FORTRESS.

IT WAS USED TO SET PEOPLE, EVEN PLACES, OUTSIDE OF TIME. THEY COULD THEN BE *RECALLED TO THE NOW*, AS IF NO TIME HAD PASSED.

COULD IT HAVE BEEN USED TO SEAL AWAY A SITH? YES. WAS IT? I DO NOT KNOW.

BUT WE CANNOT TAKE THE CHANCE.

THE SITH LORDS WERE A VARIED LOT. BUT ALL OF THEM SOUGHT THE SAME THING... *DOMINATION.*

THERE WOULD BE NO GREATER THREAT TO US.

TO WHAT WE HAVE *BUILT TOGETHER.*

OKAY-- WE KNOW THE FERMATA CAGE NEEDS TO BE PRIMED WITH ***DARK SIDE ENERGY*** TO FULLY ACTIVATE, BUT WITHOUT THE KNIGHTS OF REN, WE CAN'T GET ANY.

OR MAYBE WE ***CAN.*** SORT OF. THIS MACHINE I'VE BUILT HERE IS ***ASCENDANT*** TECH. IT'S ABLE TO TAKE ANY DARK SIDE ENERGY NEAR IT AND FOCUS IT, LIKE A ***LENS.***

IT SHOULD WORK WELL WITH THE FERMATA CAGE.

"THE CAGE ISN'T ASCENDANT--IT'S MUCH OLDER-- BUT IT'S GOT SCIENCE AND THE FORCE MIXED TOGETHER IN IT TOO.

"IT'S SOMETHING LIKE AN HOURGLASS...BUT THE SAND IS COMPOSED OF MINIATURE ***BLACK HOLES,*** HELD IN PLACE BY A ***DARK SIDE MATRIX.***

"THAT'S HOW IT CAN WARP AND TRAP TIME.

"IT ALSO MEANS IT'S ***HUNGRY.***"

WE JUST NEED TO GIVE IT A ***SNACK.***

THE DARK SIDE IS ALL AROUND US, JUST LIKE THE LIGHT. MY MACHINE HERE SHOULD "PULL" IT IN AND SHOOT IT RIGHT AT THE CAGE.

EXCELLENT WORK, KHO. LET'S GIVE IT A TRY.

AND AWAY WE GO.

KLK

VRRRRRRMMMMM

WHOA.

VADER. DO YOU FEEL IT?

YES, MY MASTER.

THEY TURNED IT ON.

...WHAT'S... HAPPENING...?

NNNNNGHHH...

YES...YES... I CAN SENSE YOU...

IT'S...A... VORTEX...

NNNNNRRRRGH!

ALMOST...

KLK

I HAVE THEM.

LORD VADER... GO.

CRIMSON DAWN IS IN *TROUBLE*, QI'RA.

OUR DEALS WITH THE OTHER SYNDICATES HAVE COLLAPSED--AND IT'S GONE BEYOND THAT.

THE EMPIRE HAS ISSUED BOUNTIES ON CRIMSON DAWN PERSONNEL, THEY'RE SEIZING OUR SHIPS--OUR ABILITY TO OPERATE PUBLICLY IS DESTROYED.

I SEE, *MARGO*. THANK YOU. TRY TO GET MESSAGES TO OUR PEOPLE TO GET TO SAFE HOUSES.

IF OUR CLANDESTINE AGENTS WANT TO REMAIN IN PLACE, THAT'S THEIR DECISION, AND WE'LL ENSURE THEIR LOYALTY IS WELL REWARDED.

YOUR ENTIRE OPERATION IS FALLING APART, QI'RA, AND YOU'RE JUST... *SIPPING YOUR TEA*.

AREN'T YOU *UPSET?*

NO, *CADELIAH*. CRIMSON DAWN WAS ALWAYS A MEANS TO AN END, EVEN BEFORE I TOOK CONTROL.

IT'S SERVED ITS PURPOSE. I CAN LET IT DIE.

GOT IT. SO WHAT'S *MY* PURPOSE, THEN?

WHY DID YOU BRING ME HERE?

YOU HAVE A *VERY* IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY.

YOU'RE MY LAST *HOPE*.

LADY QI'RA... THE ARCHIVIST IS CALLING IN AGAIN. SHE HAS ANOTHER UPDATE.

FINALLY. THANK YOU, *TRINIA*.

DID YOU GET THE FERMATA CAGE WORKING?

EASY, QI'RA. WE'RE ***EXHAUSTED***, AND IN BAD SHAPE. THAT ATTEMPT ALMOST ***KILLED*** US.

THEN LET ME ASK YOU MORE SLOWLY, ARCHIVIST.

DID... YOU...OPEN... THE...***FERMATA CAGE?***

WE DID NOT. IT WOULD HAVE KILLED US.

FINE. I UNDERSTAND. PULL YOURSELVES TOGETHER AND MOVE TO THE NEXT LOCATION, AND THEN YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE ANOTHER ATTEMPT.

YOU'RE NOT ***LISTENING*** TO ME. IT'S DANGEROUS.

AND EVEN IF THE CAGE DOESN'T KILL US, EVERY TIME WE TRY TO USE IT, THERE'S A VERY GOOD CHANCE THE EMPEROR WILL ZERO IN ON OUR LOCATION.

ACTUALLY...

"...I THINK HE ALREADY DID."

PREPARE MY SHUTTLE.

I WILL HANDLE THIS MYSELF.

IMMEDIATELY, LORD VADER.

THAT'S IT, QI'RA...WE'RE *DEAD.*

I'VE BARELY GOT ENOUGH ENERGY TO *TALK* TO YOU, MUCH LESS PACK UP OUR GEAR AND TRY TO OUTRUN A *STAR DESTROYER.*

JUST *STAY ALIVE.* I KNEW THIS MIGHT HAPPEN, SO I ALREADY SENT--

=KZZZZK!=

THEY JAMMED OUR COMMS!

WE'VE GOTTA... WE'VE GOTTA DO SOMETHING!

IF YOU'VE GOT ANY GREAT IDEAS, I'M LISTENING.

I'VE GOT AN IDEA.

NOT SURE I'D CALL IT *GREAT.*

HNH.

THE SITE SEEMS DESERTED, LORD VADER.

KKRRRNCH

YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD *HIDE?* FROM *ME?* YOU ARE *FOOLS.*

SUBMIT, OR DIE.

WE'LL SUBMIT! WE'LL SUBMIT!

HNF. NEVER.

THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN *DO*, ARCHIVIST. DO YOU NOT KNOW WHO THAT *IS?* APHRA TOLD ME ABOUT HIM. WE CAN'T FIGHT.

YES. I KNOW WHO HE IS. HE'S THE REASON WE FOUGHT SO HARD. THE REASON THE GALAXY IS THE WAY IT IS.

HE'S A *SITH.*

VERY WELL.

RRK!

KKTKK...

VADER!

YES. IT'S ME.

AND BEFORE YOU ASK, NO. I'M NOT AFRAID. NOT EVEN A LITTLE. I'VE WANTED THIS FOR *SO LONG.*

I'M *READY.*

DON'T YOU KNOW WHO I AM? WHAT YOU MEAN TO ME?

YOU ARE DEAD.

AND I AM YOUR DEATH.

SSST

To be continued!

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